

Dear Sir Keir Starmer,

We are public health experts. We know what it takes for people to be healthy. Together, we want to build a society where all children can thrive, no matter where they grow up. We are writing to therefore urge you to prioritise expanding free school meals in your election manifesto to all school children, phased in by extending Free School Meals to children from households on Universal Credit as a first step.

The Labour Mayor of London's introduction of free school meals in all the capital's primary schools is to be celebrated. This is an important first step towards every child being able to enjoy a school lunch, and has enabled some local authorities to extend access to free school meals in secondary schools. However, too many children are still missing out and nationally there is a postcode lottery. Extending Free School Meals nationally is a way to ensure children receive good nutrition vital for a healthy population.

Your mission to "*build an NHS fit for the future*" rightly focuses on the need to "*change so we focus on prevention*". You specify "*nutritious food*" as an "*essential building block for a healthy life*". As with any preventative measure, the earlier the intervention, the better. School food presents an unrivalled opportunity to support an entire generation with quality nutrition for 190 days of the year. We ask you to take up this opportunity, and champion that every school child has a healthy, sustainable, tasty lunch each day. This may include a phased approach, starting with extending eligibility to the most disadvantaged children first.

We welcome your plans to introduce breakfast clubs in every primary school in England, which will be fully funded and serve healthy food. Breakfast clubs are a brilliant way for children to start their day; well fuelled for the learning ahead. But we also know breakfast clubs can only make up one part of a whole school approach to health. A truly preventative intervention must maximise exposure. That is why we want to see good nutrition assured for all children, in all state schools, throughout the day.

Children's health is dependent on their food. It is no coincidence that, as long as healthy food is over twice as expensive as unhealthy food per calorie, the poorest in society are most likely to have diet-related ill health.¹ Fewer than two in every 100 packed lunches meet school nutrition standards.² We are seeing high levels of tooth decay and stunted growth³. Research has found that providing school food for all reduces childhood obesity more than comparable interventions.⁴ Assuring children good health gives them the best chance at staying healthy in later life.

This supports another of your missions: to "*break down barriers to opportunity at every stage*". Ensuring all children can enjoy a school meal, no matter where they live, can reduce inequality both during childhood, and for the rest of their lives. This has been realised in Sweden, where a ground-breaking study showed providing all children with healthy meals led to pupils on average having a 3% higher lifetime income. This number jumps to nearly 6% for the poorest pupils, meaning the benefits of this intervention extend across the lifetime of a generation⁵.

¹ [The Food Foundation, \(2023\). *The Broken Plate 2023*.](#)

² [Evans C.E.L., Melia K.E., Rippin H.L., et al, \(2020\). *A repeated cross-sectional survey assessing changes in diet and nutrient quality of English primary school children's packed lunches between 2006 and 2016*. *BMJ Open* 2020;10:e029688.](#)

³ <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/broken-plate-2023>

⁴ [Holford, A. and Rabe B., \(2022\) *Impacts of Local Authority Universal Free School Meal schemes on Child Obesity and Household Food Expenditure*, MiSoC Explainer.](#)

⁵ <https://academic.oup.com/restud/article/89/2/876/6273674?login=true>

Free School Meals is not only a policy which is hugely beneficial for our nation's health but is also a priority for your target voters. A staggering 82% of prospective Labour voters are in favour of extending free school meals immediately to all children from families receiving Universal Credit, followed by a future expansion to all school children. The majority of the public (71%), including both Conservative and Labour voters, think the current income threshold is inadequate or should not exist at all.⁶

It also makes economic sense: PwC estimates such an investment will have paid for itself within two parliaments. This will come from inflation-busting returns of £1.71 for every £1 invested.⁷ We ask you to take up an unrivalled opportunity to support our children's health, for now and the future, which will reduce inequalities and pay for itself by committing Labour to extending the current free school meals threshold.

Investing in nutritious school meals will bolster the future of our health, our NHS and our economy. We urge you to take on board our recommendation and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Camilla Kingdon, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

William Roberts, Chief Executive of Royal Society for Public Health

Professor David Strain, Chair BMA Board of Science Committee

Professor Kevin Fenton, President of the Faculty of Public Health

Eddie Crouch, Chair of the British Dental Association

Liz Stockley, CEO of The British Dietetic Association

Sharon White OBE, CEO the School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA)

Dr Christoffer van Tulleken, Academic and BBC broadcaster

Dr Adam Kay former doctor and author

Dr Naomi Maynard, Feeding Liverpool

Matthew Philpott, Executive Director, Health Equalities Group

Martin Drewry, CEO of Health Poverty Action

Anna Garrod, Policy & Influencing Director, Impact on Urban Health

Professor Maria Bryant, UKRI Fix our Food, and Food and Healthy Weight theme for the

⁶ <https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/new-data-labour-and-conservative-voters-overwhelmingly-back-giving-free-school-meals>

⁷ [Impact on Urban Health, \(2022\). *Expanding free school meals: a cost benefit analysis.*](#)

UK Prevention Research Partnership: ActEarly Research Collaborative

Professor Kate E Pickett, Academic Director of Health Equity North, University of York.

Dr Nicola Heslehurst, Chair of the UK Association for the Study of Obesity

Professor Wendy Wills, Professor of Food and Public Health, University of Hertfordshire;
Professor Rebecca O'Connell and Dr Laura Hamilton, Centre for Research in Public Health and
Community Care(CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire.

Heather Brown, Professor of Health Inequalities, University of Lancaster

Councillor Lynne Caffrey, Chair Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board

Emma Rigby, Chief Executive, Association for Young People's Health

Professor Charlotte Hardman, Institute of Population Health, University of Liverpool

Katharine Jenner, Director of Obesity Health Alliance

Matthew Taylor, CEO NHS Confederation

Gwen Hines, CEO, Save the Children UK